

# How Do Chinese Celebrate Christmas?

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When I was in China, my impression of Christmas came from children's books and my relatives in America; in fact, my first American dream was related to the Christmas holiday.



I remember reading about this awesome place at the north pole, where a jolly old man in red suit lived with a bunch of small people wearing green hats. At night, a magical train would choo choo around the world to pick up children from as far away as China and it would arrive at the place in their sleep. When children woke up the next morning at their own bed, they would discover tons of candy in their pockets! If somebody missed the magic train, there was no need to panic, for the old man was the kindest man on earth, he would still deliver goodies to whomever missed the train. But, he only could enter a house through the chimney, for knocking on the door would ruin the surprise. However, he had never visited me because we did not have a chimney!

Having relatives in America made the Christmas even more confusing. My great-grandfather was among the first generation of Chinese to emigrate to America. He came as a laborer to build the railroad in the California area. Seeking a better life in the land of the unknown, my grandma later sent her only son, my uncle, at age nine to accompany my great-grandfather. It took about a month for his boat to arrive at San Francisco from Hong Kong, while his sister, my mother, lived life through a completely different routine. Later, my grandma settled down in mainland China. So did my mother, and consequently her children, including me. So, my early “knowledge” of Christmas came from the description of immigrated relatives, as well as my own interpretation. On Christmas day, you decorated a tree-- *you planted the tree in a pot, since it was inside*—with lots of shining goodies—*lots of gold since you could dig out gold everywhere in America*, and singing and dancing around the tree-- *it would bring you good luck!* I dreamed of one day living in America, the richest country on earth. I heard they even built a huge gate, maybe a bridge, using pure gold!



Looking back, my misreading of Christmas was also contributed by the government policy. Then, the government actually prohibited public gatherings in the name of Christmas celebration, which was considered a way of Western imperialists to “pollute Chinese minds.” In my twenty-some years in Beijing, I did not recall any Christmas celebration in public, although I am sure Christians in China then celebrated the birth of Lord Jesus in their private worship. There were no Christmas decorations on the street, nor were any Christmas items were sold in the department stores. Christmas was a holiday celebrated in the West and it had little or nothing to do with the Chinese.

Today, however, Christmas is celebrated in China in a grand fashion. If you now visit the same city in December where Christmas celebrations were virtually nonexistent twenty years ago, you will be surprised to find Santa and his Reindeers visible on the streets, loads of Christmas ornaments and artificial trees piling up in the markets, and Christmas carols broadcast through loud speakers in various department stores. The holiday atmosphere is second to Chinese New Year in some cities. Churches and cathedrals are packed with people attending candle light services on Christmas Eve, accompanied by the harmonious sound of a grand organ and people singing “Silent Night” in unison in Chinese.



In a sense, this phenomenon shows how much China is open to the world, and how much government policy has changed over the years. From restriction to encouragement, the authorities aimed to use Christmas to boost the economy and through consumer spending. In a survey from six Chinese cities conducted by a local newspaper, two-thirds of the residents intended to celebrate Christmas and about 60% of the respondents considered

Christmas a time to spend with loved ones and friends. Many business owners enjoy the economic benefits brought about through Christmas sales; some business turnover rates increased by more than 30% during the Christmas period in 2006.

Since the celebration of Christmas has become so widespread in many cities, some Chinese people have expressed concerns about the future of traditional Chinese holidays. Professors from Beijing University and Qinghua University, two of the top ivy leagues in China, initiated a challenge to “resist” foreign cultural infiltration. They warned the populace that traditional Chinese festivals, the essence of Chinese culture, were being replaced little by little with “foreign” holidays such as Christmas, especially among young people. They urged the people to hold firm their own culture. In an article posted on the discussion board of Baidu, a Chinese equivalent of Wiki, a writer expressed his anger about the young people’s craziness over Christmas. What a shame! Chinese college students who know Christmas can’t tell the date of the Dragon Boat Festival on the lunar calendar. As a solution to these cultural tensions, Christmas in China has brought in more “local” color. Somebody came up with the idea of a Chinese Santa, a jolly old man in an old-fashioned Chinese red suit!



What about the true meaning of Christmas, you may wonder? – *not just in China, this is a universal question no matter where you are.* After celebrating Christmas for years, some participants don't understand its connection with Jesus Christ. One of the Chinese interviewers confessed that she was very surprised to hear about the religious aspect of Christmas; she had always considered Christmas a carnival festival. Unfortunately, many young people in China share her point of view, that is, they use Christmas as an excuse to have fun. Last Christmas Eve, *Anhui News* described how thousands of people, most of them in their early 20's, hand in hand, casually waited for Midnight Mass in Xuanwumen Church in Beijing. A few minutes before midnight, loud cheers broke out; the crowd waved like crazy. Some girls even climbed on the shoulders of their boyfriends: Santa Claus came to the scene and threw candy to the crowd. The scenario described in the newspaper was very much like a rock star with crazy fans!

While the young people were enjoying the party, salesmen were collecting the harvest of economic boosts through Christmas sales, and Chinese elites were heating up the debates to preserve the culture, tens of thousands of workers were busy in factories producing a variety of Christmas goods in small towns throughout China. It is estimated that about 70% of the world's Christmas decorations, including almost all of the artificial Christmas trees, are made in China. Many of the cheap laborers are part-time farmers from rural areas, where life is still quite backward, people live on an average of \$1 to \$2 a day. They take these jobs when the farming load is light. Although they may not know the origin of Christmas, these people cheer for the Christmas holiday since the celebration is their economic blessing. They depend on Christmas to put rice on the table to feed the family.

Since I became a Christian, my understanding of Christmas has certainly risen to a different level. I think this is true for all of us, regardless of one's nationality. In Hong Kong, where Christmas is heavily commercialized, the churches have called on members to strive to give, especially during the holiday season. Christmas is not just about Christmas cards, Christmas presents, Christmas get-togethers, and so on; it is about living out the spirit of the first Christmas in the manger. Churches ask members to not focus on the search for personal happiness, rather, on sharing the joy at the birth of our Savior.

No matter where you are, in China or in America, speaking Chinese or English, no matter your cultural background, we should celebrate the same Christmas, the birth of Lord Jesus. Let us encourage each other to share the Good News--it is the best Christmas gift you can offer in this holiday season!